

Torsten Wissmann

GEOGRAPHIES OF URBAN SOUND



Geographies of Urban Sound

TORSTEN WISSMANN

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ASHGATE

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
 Listen Up!	 1
1 Thoughts on Sound and the City	9
1.1 Individual Perception as Basic Requirement	9
1.2 Sense of Place: Concept and Multidisciplinary Theoretical Approaches	17
1.3 Geographical Studies on Sense of Place and Sound	26
1.4 Sound in the Humanities	36
 2 Sound Effects	 45
2.1 Various Effects of Sound on the Urban Dweller	45
2.2 Unwanted Sounds	52
2.3 Wanted Sounds	62
2.4 The Absence of Sound	69
2.5 The Individual Soundscape	75
 3 Sound in the City	 83
3.1 Soundscape Studies in Acoustic Ecology	83
3.2 Sound Recording in the Field	91
3.3 Classifying Sounds in Different Ways	102
3.4 Empirical Studies in Lisbon, London, and Austin	108
 4 Uses of Sound in the City	 133
4.1 Managing Sound in the Urban Environment	133
4.2 Noise Perception vs. Noise in Urban Planning	138
4.3 Branding a City Through Sound	153
4.4 Touristic Potentials of Sound	172
4.5 Sacred Silence	188
 5 Excursus: The Medial Creation of the City in Audio Drama	 203
5.1 Sound in Media	203
5.2 Audio Drama – <i>The Three Investigators</i> vs. <i>Gabriel Burns</i>	204

6	Sound Is the City	227
6.1	The Missing Sense	227
6.2	Place-Based Sound	229
6.3	Geographies of Urban Sound	231
6.4	Breaking the Sound Barrier	234
	<i>Bibliography</i>	237
	<i>Index</i>	259

List of Figures

3.1	Lisbon – Soundwalk and Research Areas	112
3.2	Lisbon – Sound Cloud	113
3.3	London – Research Areas, Including Area 9: London Bridge	116
3.4	Austin, TX – Research Areas	118
3.5	Sound Point Recording – Sequence From Research Area 1	120
3.6	Austin, TX – Research Area 1: Sixth Street	121
3.7	Austin, TX – Research Area 2: University of Texas Campus	123
3.8	Austin, TX – Research Area 3: Interstate 35	126
3.9	Austin, TX – Research Area 4: Hyde Park	127
3.10	Austin, TX – Research Area 5: Barton Creek	129
4.1	Frankfurt am Main – Air-Traffic Noise	147
4.2	“What Do You Think About Flying?” (n = 2,550) (in %)	152
4.3	Giant Guitars at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport	154
4.4	Live Music Locations in Downtown Austin, TX	158
4.5	Austin Walking Tour	183
4.6	Audio-Guided Tours – Soundscape Deconstruction	185
5.1	<i>Gabriel Burns</i> and <i>TTI</i> – Associations Clouds	209
5.2	<i>Gabriel Burns</i> and <i>TTI</i> – Locations Clouds	212
5.3	<i>Gabriel Burns</i> and <i>TTI</i> – Sound Cloud	221

List of Tables

3.1	Decibel Comparison Chart	95
4.1	Austin American-Statesman – Hotwords Sound and Music	164
4.2	A.A.-Statesman – Organizations Involved With Music Events	168
4.3	A.A.-Statesman – Occurrence of Music Genres (September–November 2011)	170
4.4	Museums in Austin, TX, (Not) Using Audio-Guided Tours	175
4.5	Austin, TX – Audio-Guided Tours (Including The Domain)	180

Listen Up!

The cacophonous mix of sound that surrounds us in an urban environment is usually not disturbing because what we hear is an integral and accepted part of the urban dweller's life. Yet it is the visual element of the city that dominates the standard urban vocabulary of experience. Sound has long been neglected in urban studies. Traffic, music, language, and nature, as primary examples, help to create unique soundscapes essential to the place-based character of each city, and no consideration of these cityscapes should fail to include them. Substantive research on sound and soundscapes began over half a century ago as Acoustic Ecology with the World Soundscape Project, which focused on human-environmental relationships based on sound. There has not been a sustained body of research since then.

There are many ways to consider urban sound, from pure research to applied. As examples, raw urban sound can be recorded and analyzed for stress, tourist soundwalks can be developed to try to capture the auditive characteristics of the city for the visitor, or the urban soundscape can be deconstructed into single *sound events* that are subsequently put together to form artistic audio collages. Clearly, sound must be taken into account when considering a city's sense of a place, where a range of sounds – from music to human, from technology to nature – play integral roles in creating local identity and cultural boundaries. And, of course, governments at all scales, from local to federal, often become involved in issues of sound, from mitigation to promotion, as in the case of music. Taking into account both the urban soundscape and the impacts of sound on the urban dweller, I understand sound not as a by-product of urban life but as a fundamental part of urban life – something essential for understanding the city's sense of place.

The purpose of this book is to outline a framework for the study of sound within the urban landscape and to provide a unique look at the geographies of urban sound. Coming from a social geographic background, I am particularly interested in the effects of sound on the individual and the many ways sound influences how we engage the city as place, especially in terms of daily routines. I aim to uncover the socio-scientific potential of sound in the urban environment based on the understanding that sound cannot and must not be seen as detached from this urban landscape, but rather as a constituent element of the same. To my understanding, sound exists not only *within* the city; sound *is* the city.

I am convinced that studying the geographies of urban sound involves far more than geography as a discipline. Understanding the daily-lived experiences and environmental perceptions of the urban dweller and his/her *place* in the city should be of interest to all who wish to understand the city as home.

Chapter 1 presents the theoretical base of the book. Elements that comprise the individual's perception and the concept of a city's sense of place are described in detail. To this end, geographical studies on the sense of place and broader humanistic approaches to sound are explored, both within the context of urban settings. The chapter closes by addressing the many possible effects of sound on the lives of the urban dweller. Chapter 2 answers the call of the first chapter about the possible effects of sound. Findings are strongly informed by phenomenological thoughts derived from a literature based primarily in psychological, sociological, and medical works. Valuable input comes from acoustic design and architecture, ethnology and urban planning. Studies of the processes of hearing and the physiognomy of the human ear, the nature of wanted and unwanted sounds, and the absence of sound and the essence of silence form the heart of this chapter. Chapter 3 approaches empirical studies on urban sound with the methodology of acoustic ecology. Recoding, deconstruction, and classification of the soundscape are presented. Findings from three field projects in Portugal, England, and the United States adapt, translate, and evolve existing practice. The latest developments in mapping and acoustics are considered and utilized in these analyses of place and the perception of sound. Chapter 4 is comprised of a series of empirical studies in Austin, Texas, and Frankfurt am Main, Germany, that examine the effects of sound on the urban dweller and show how it influences the development of a city's sense of place in everyday life. This chapter includes examinations of noise perception and the nature of audio-guided tours, a study of sound-identity and the city's image creation (branding), and a consideration of the complex relationship between sacred sound and the creation of a sense of place. Chapter 5 considers the relationship between sound as media and the urban environment. The acoustic creation of a city in audio drama – acoustic productions developed from radio drama – can be incorporated into our environmental understanding and thereby play a role in shaping our perception of a city's sense of place. Two popular audio drama series – i.e., audio plays – are analyzed to demonstrate the effects of sound on the urban dweller's perception of the city. Chapter 6 summarizes the described findings and formulates conclusions. The theoretical frame presented in Chapters 1 and 2, combined with the methodological groundwork of Chapter 3 and the analysis of empirical findings in Chapters 4 and 5, demonstrates that any discussion about the urban environment must consider both the individual and collective experiences of sound. The acoustic element, just like the visual, plays its part in creating the city's sense of place.

Chapter 1: Thoughts on Sound and the City

We start with a philosophical discussion of individual perception grounded in the work of Edmund Husserl (see 1960, 1983, 1997, 2001, 2010) (section 1.1.1). Perception is always dependent on the individual's own abilities, which are fundamentally different from anything else. Bernhard Waldenfels' *phenomenology*